

**Brian McGuinness, ed.**

*Wittgenstein in Cambridge:*

*Letters and Documents 1911-1951.*

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This is a splendid volume, a significant publishing achievement. The collections on which it builds, *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore (LRKM)*, 1974) and *Cambridge Letters (CL)*, 1995), were important additions to the literature. But neither measures up to the present work (*WIC*). Now solely the responsibility of Brian McGuinness — *LRKM* was edited by Georg von Wright with McGuinness' aid, *CL* jointly by the two of them — it is a model of serious scholarship and high-quality bookmaking.

*WIC* has 439 letters and documents to *CL*'s 205 letters and *LRKM*'s 122. Everything important in *LRKM* is in *CL*, and everything important in *CL* is in *WIC*. The main difference is the coverage. As well as supplementing the letters from Wittgenstein to Russell, Keynes and Moore with ones from them to him, *CL* includes correspondence with Frank Ramsey and Piero Sraffa. And going one better *WIC* includes correspondence with other colleagues, friends, students and officials, along with a fair number of documents from Wittgenstein's time in Cambridge, not least the minutes of various meetings in which he is mentioned. Also the editorial comments have been expanded and more useful indexes supplied.

Apparently since the publication of *CL* little of value has been uncovered for the period between Wittgenstein's arrival in Cambridge in 1911 and his return to the city (and to philosophy) in 1929. The sole new item in *WIC* from these years is an extract from the minutes of a meeting of the Moral Sciences Club in 1912 reporting that Wittgenstein talked on 'What is Philosophy?' for four minutes, well within the seven-minute limit he had earlier got the Club to adopt. Rereading the letters themselves, I was again struck by his hypersensitivity, impatience and irksome carping. We are only getting slivers of a life but there can be no missing how hard a time he had coping — and how much slack Russell, Keynes, Moore and Ramsey were willing to cut him.

In the material from 1929 to 1951, the single letter from Sraffa to Wittgenstein in *CL* has been augmented by four memoranda linked to their conversations and some 40 more letters between them. Though worth having, these letters do not make for particularly pleasant reading. When practical matters are at stake (about travel to Vienna after the Nazis' arrival, for instance), Wittgenstein is all business. But mostly he agonizes about himself and his relationship with his friend. Who else would have had the nerve to write to Sraffa: 'I wish to say one more thing: I think that your fault in a discussion is this: YOU ARE NOT HELPFUL!' (224)? Nor is Wittgenstein's grouching redeemed by the letters and notes touching on philosophy. I am, I have to confess, less sure than McGuinness that this material gives us 'rather more

than a speculative idea of the conversations to which Wittgenstein ascribed much of the inspiration of his *Philosophical Investigations*' (1).

Yet another side of Wittgenstein comes to the fore in his correspondence with students and non-philosophers from 1929 on. Here he is much less prickly, indeed sometimes positively friendly and light-hearted. In letters to the ethical analyst, C. L. Stevenson, who was just starting out, he is encouraging and generous. In letters to Alice Ambrose he handles, rather admirably, a strong-willed student who, feeling she was being railroaded, had the guts to push back. And in letters to the physicist W. H. Watson he could hardly have been brighter or breezier (he seems to have been tickled by the examples Watson sent him of scientists spouting nonsense in off-hours).

A majority of the correspondence in the volume post-1940 is from Wittgenstein to Norman Malcolm, Rush Rhees and von Wright. This material has been previously published but benefits from being brought together and arranged chronologically. I had not realised how often Wittgenstein wrote letters in batches and recycled the same sentences. Nor, knowing how much he accomplished during the period, was I prepared for his virtually non-stop grumbling about his inability to work and the poor quality of his thoughts. What mostly impressed me, however, were the letters Wittgenstein wrote in the last year or so of his life when he knew he was dying. This time around I was, if anything, even more moved by his fortitude and determination to keep on working. These letters, I dare say, show him at his best.

The other material in the volume confirms and fills out the picture of Wittgenstein as a maddening customer. He never seems to have missed a chance to make a mountain out of a molehill, take umbrage and create problems for himself (though, notably, not in his letters, new in *WIC*, to a Cambridge University administrator). And on more than a few occasions he complains about his health, his mental/spiritual state, the strain of teaching and other real or apparent troubles. Still, he does not always come off badly. One sees why friends would speak not only of his honesty and seriousness but also of his loyalty and decency, and why, for all his faults, he was supported to the hilt by the powers-that-be at Cambridge. (The mathematician J. E. Littlewood's appraisal of him for the Council of Trinity College in 1930 especially caught my eye.) McGuinness warns against treating *WIC* as 'a first introduction to Wittgenstein and his circle' (2), but it is not a bad one either. Read in conjunction with the accompanying notes, the letters provide a more rounded portrait of the man than most biographical works.

Pressed to criticise the collection, I would only say that I missed the facsimiles of Wittgenstein's handwriting in *LRKM* (these were omitted in *CL*) and more information on the sources of the items would have been welcome. No doubt, another hundred letters would not have gone amiss; a Selected Letters including correspondence with Wittgenstein's non-Cambridge English acquaintances and his Viennese friends surely cannot be far off. But for the time being *WIC* will do very nicely. Books as readable, useful and illuminating are, to put it mildly, thin on the ground.

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